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THE CHOICE IS THEIRS

In these days of international crises and economic stress, it is easy to get discouraged and wonder, "What's the use?" The Russian bear tramples Afghanistan. The Iranians continue their terrorism and double-talk. The economic crunch is upon us, and the jobless list continues to lengthen.

Despite these somber times, we in the United States know that nowhere else in the world do people have as much freedom of choice. Immigrants of yesterday and today first exercise that freedom in choosing this land. And all of us have the freedom to make decisions affecting ourselves, our future, and the continued vigor and prosperity of our land and resources.

In the past 40 years, the population of the United States nearly doubled. A moderate projection indicates that in the next 50 years the population will reach 300 million--nearly 2.5 times the number of people in the late 1920's. With this continuing growth, demand soars for food, clothing, timber, water, recreation, wildlife, open space, minerals, and energy--all products of the natural resources of rural America.

Paralleling the population growth of the 20th century has been a mass migration of rural people to the cities. This migration has congested our urban areas, and accelerated the mechanization of agriculture, the increase in monoculture, the expansion of farm size, and the abandonment of many rural communities.

Now the trend is reversing. People are returning to rural areas. During the seventies, the population of nonmetropolitan areas increased by some 6.5 million people; 3 million of these people moved from cities. As we entered 1980, the population of nonmetropolitan areas in the United States was an estimated 60 million.

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Speech by M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment, in the Five College Rural Issues Seminar Series, Center for Rural Communities, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass., May 14, 1980.

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In terms of sheer numbers, the increase in rural population may not appear large. After all, three-fourths of our population--160 million people--still live in metropolitan areas, on less than 2 percent of our land. But the change in migration patterns is significant for the new aspirations being brought to rural areas--for those aspirations and expectations are urban.

Commenting on this change, William C. Boykin, Sr., of Alcorn University, said at a recent USDA Outlook Conference: "Rural people now demand, and expect to get, more and better education; more and better housing; improved health care delivery services; expanded police protection; public recreational facilities--amenities once had or expected only by urban dwellers."

Despite the influx of city people with moderate and good incomes, rural areas still are home to a disproportionate share of the nation's poor--including many blacks, Hispanics, and native Americans. On a per capita basis, these people still have fewer physicians, dentists, and nurses. They are short of plumbing, good drinking water, decent housing, public transportation, and educational and employment opportunities.

The plight of the rural poor was described very well 13 years ago in a landmark study, The People Left Behind a report of the President's National Commission on Rural Poverty. That report showed that, "Rural poverty is so widespread, and so acute, as to be a national disgrace, and its consequences have swept into our cities, violently."

The report went on to say that, "The problems of rural poverty are complicated by the fact that many rural poor have almost lost all hope of improving their situation."

Although we've made some progress in the war on poverty since 1967, poverty is still with us.

Lynn M. Daft, associate director of the White House Domestic Policy Staff, says that he "can find cause for both hope and despair" in the poverty record since publication of The People Left Behind. On balance, he finds cause for "a great deal of hope."



Daft, however, finds insufficient progress in solving what he terms "the most difficult, intractable problems." He is convinced that the problems of rural America, including poverty, will not be overcome without extensive reform of welfare programs, a coordinated program of human resource development, and substantial additions to the capacity of local governments and other public institutions to deliver essential services and to bring about structural change. Daft describes these goals as rural America's "unfinished agenda."

It was to help complete that agenda that President Carter on December 20, 1979, announced his Small Community and Rural Development Policy. The President pointed out that "we have long needed to translate generalized concerns about rural problems into a set of specific goals, principles, programs, and mechanisms for effective implementation."

Expressed in the President's policy is the following commitment:

"In partnership with the Congress, state and local governments, and private sector leadership, my administration is committed to work toward:

- o Meeting the basic human needs of rural Americans;
- o Providing opportunities for rural people to be fully and productively employed and providing a favorable climate for business and economic development;
- o Addressing the rural problems of distance and size; and
- o Promoting the responsible use and stewardship of America's natural resources and environment while preserving the quality of rural life."

To achieve these goals, the President has set up a working group that includes sub-cabinet officials of 15 federal departments and agencies, as well as representatives of the President's Office of Management and Budget and Domestic Policy Staff. The working group is co-chaired by Alex Mercure, assistant secretary of agriculture for rural development, and by Jack Watson, cabinet secretary and the President's assistant for intergovernmental affairs. Members of this top-level working group are charged with making sure that each sector of the executive branch contributes to improving life in rural areas.



In other actions:

The President has also directed the Secretary of Agriculture to appoint an advisory council to monitor implementation results and advise him on needed federal actions.

He has invited the nation's governors to establish State Rural Development Councils to achieve effective federal-state coordination in rural development activities.

He has called on the working group to make an annual review of policies, programs, and budget levels to determine their adequacy in meeting rural needs.

He has directed cabinet officials to align agency policies and programs with rural development goals.

President Carter has described as a "cornerstone" of his policy "the coordination of federal, state, and local efforts to serve rural people and enhance their prospects for the future."

He has said that to accomplish such coordination, "Federal officials must be constantly exposed to a range of rural experiences and information and brought into contact with those people who represent rural viewpoints and are working to meet rural concerns."

This emphasis on feeding information and experience from rural America to the federal establishment seems to me highly significant and a departure from some of the "Washington knows best" approaches to rural development of the past.

In a condensed form, this is the basic structure of the administration's Small Community and Rural Development Policy, now five months old. It emphasizes federal-regional-state-and-local partnership in meeting the needs of rural America.

You are probably aware that this is only one in a series of Washington efforts to do something about rural development. It was in the late 1950's that the U.S. Department of Agriculture embarked on the first rural development program. Early experimental efforts were carried out in selected rural development pilot counties--counties with unusually low per capita income, high unemployment, underdeveloped resources, and inferior community services.



Since then, the department has rarely been without some form of rural development program.

We have experienced Rural Areas Development (RAD) and created Technical Action Panels (TAP's); we have authorized 190 resource conservation and development areas; we have had scores of committees and task forces and advisory groups. And rural America has continued to have more than its share of problems.

In 1972 the land-grant universities encouraged Congress to pass Title V of the Rural Development Act. Since then, the executive branch and the Congress have provided this title with only meager funds. It's no wonder that a new initiative by the President was needed. And it's no wonder that you are asking for a clearer definition of the role of land-grant universities in rural development.

You've been working in rural development for a long, long time. You are close to the people of your state. You have the research and extension capabilities to assist rural people. You have what it takes to contribute to planning, direction, fact gathering, guidance, implementation, and directed research in support of many of the broad areas we call rural development. Through extension and other means, you have made outreach an American tradition. Your abilities for service and leadership in rural development are practically without limit.

The President's policy on rural development describes many opportunities for future action by land-grant universities. Take housing, for example. Plans need to be made available for low-cost homes, including energy-saving homes, and rural people need to be trained to construct them. There are similar opportunities in health care, education, social services, and creating jobs. Tonight I want to discuss just one of those opportunities: promoting the responsible use and stewardship of America's natural resources and environment.

Land use is the foundation of all rural development. It determines how we allocate our land resources among urban, agricultural, timber, recreation, transportation, wildlife, and energy uses. The President stressed its importance when he requested a nationwide study on agricultural lands. Many of you have participated in the National Agricultural Lands Study, which is jointly administered by USDA and the President's Council on Environmental Quality and due for completion on December 31, 1980.



Bob Gray, former administrative assistant to Congressman Jim Jeffords of Vermont, directs the study.

Those working on the study have already come up with projections, termed "explosive" by several editorial writers, showing the diminished acreage of prime farmland that will be left in each state by the year 2000. In 1977, Massachusetts had about 450,000 acres of first-class farmland, with about 160,000 acres of this total actually planted in crops. If present conversion trends continue--if good farmland continues to be taken for homes and roads and shopping centers at current rates--the state could lose more than 230,000 acres by the year 2000. That's more than half of Massachusetts' best agricultural land, gone irrevocably.

Many of us are convinced these statistics must be turned around, and soon. But there are heavy economic pressures operating in the other direction. Robert G. Healy, senior associate with the Conservation Foundation, wrote recently:

"For most farmers, land has been an enormously profitable asset. In fact, one hears stories in virtually any farming area about the farmer who was dirt-poor all his life but sold his land and retired a millionaire. Available statistics bear out the truth of this observation. Between 1971 and 1977, net farm income totaled \$136 billion. This represented the fruit of the farmer's back-breaking labor, his risk-taking, and his management skill. During the same period, the value of farmland, with little or no effort on the farmer's part, rose some \$223 billion. It is little wonder that land is jestingly referred to as 'the farmer's last cash crop.'"

Regardless of the findings of the National Agricultural Lands Study, education for individual landowners and government officials, is going to be imperative to achieving rational decisions on land use.

Water use runs a close second to land in their respective importance to rural development. In some areas of the country, water is more important than land. For example, the expanded agricultures of the midwest and southwest have relied increasingly on nonrenewable groundwater stocks for irrigation. The mining of aquifers has caused land to sink in some areas and salt water intrusion in others. Loss of these lands due to improper water use can stop rural development. Only with research and education can we reverse these destructive practices.



Water pollution threatens the east in the same way it threatens all other regions of the country. Although you have joined in the desperate struggle to stop this despoiling of our water resources, all of us must do more.

Soil erosion by both water and wind endangers the future of some parts of rural America. In many parts of the country, soil is eroding at rates that could reduce productivity by one-fifth in the next 50 years. The impact of such a loss on the viability of rural communities is serious.

Another candidate for research and education is the production of fuels and other chemicals on the farm. While gasohol, containing 10 percent ethyl alcohol, is already on sale in several states, the production of ethanol from grain is only one alternative.

At the most, there are 300 commercial crops in the United States. Of these, only 80 are major crops. Yet there are at least a quarter of a million botanical species in the world, and their chemical composition is largely unexplored. Research may uncover crops that can produce more BTU's per acre than those now used to produce ethanol.

In New England, there is a continuing need to work with farmers with low income and limited resources to help them derive more income from their farm woodlots. Two USDA agencies--the Forest Service and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service--are conducting a test program which uses cost-sharing funds to promote the use of wood for energy. The project pays to eligible woodlot owners all costs of the technical assistance needed to develop 10-year forest management plans and to mark stands of timber for selective cutting for fuel use. It also covers 75 percent of the costs of building access roads.

The aim is to help farmers arrange for fuelwood harvests that are profitable and environmentally sound.

USDA also has conducted a fuelwood survey in the six New England states. The survey found that:

- o 2.9 million cords of fuelwood were burned during the winter of 1978--nine percent more than during the previous winter;
- o 4.3 million households, about 33 percent of those in the six states, burn wood as a source of heat;
- o Wood supplies four percent of all household heat in the region, displacing about 226 million gallons of #2 fuel oil;
- o Of the 3.1 million cords of wood acquired during the heating season, 38 percent were purchased.

This is a promising trend for conserving gas and oil and for increasing the income of many local New Englanders. There is opportunity for research in developing more efficient wood-burning devices for the home and for stepped-up educational and forestry incentives programs. This is only one example of the way the Forest Service, State forestry agencies, the Soil Conservation Service, and land-grant universities work together toward common objectives.

We must work with local people to increase their capacity for community action. One of the most encouraging developments in the President's initiatives is the apparent consensus that rural development decisions must be made by local people. Federal administrators are specifically directed to "manage their programs in ways that recognize local priorities and facilitate local decision-making in rural America."

Helping local people make local decisions has always been a major objective of land-grant universities. For USDA's Soil Conservation Service, working with local people through Soil Conservation Districts and the Resource Conservation and Development Program, this is also a seriously felt responsibility. The two RC&D areas here in Massachusetts each include more than 1 million acres. They are the Berkshire-Franklin RC&D here in the west and the Pilgrim RC&D area on and around Cape Cod. Berkshire-Franklin has been deeply involved with timber management projects and the Fuelwood Study.



Like other RC&D areas, these depend on local leadership and initiative, with accelerated technical and financial assistance available from state and federal agencies. University of Massachusetts extension people have worked closely with the two RC&D councils since they began.

The Soil Conservation Service has proposed that some of its monies be re-directed to provide greater assistance in working with RC&D councils. I've accepted that proposal. If we can succeed in convincing others that this is worthwhile, we'll increase our potential for cooperation with you on this effort.

There is a bottomless well of opportunities for land-grant universities to contribute to rural development. But you know that and my words don't create the resources you need to do your part.

The President's initiative on rural development, however, does create a chance for you and the USDA to strive once again in the fierce competition for needed funds. I assure you that Anson Bertrand and I are doing just that. Because of the rigorous constraints needed to meet inflation and other economic stresses, we'd be foolish to make promises or arouse great expectations. Nevertheless, if we fail, it will not be because we didn't try.

The name of the Washington game is persistence--and persist we must--all of us together. The capability of rural Americans to make intelligent decisions about their future--and to make rational choices--depends on our persistence.

Rural people need information, expertise, organizational experience--confidence in their ability to do things together. Through cooperative efforts among the land-grant universities, USDA, and other federal agencies, we can provide them with what they need, recognizing fully that the choices--the decisions--are theirs to make.

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